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‘Jewish Cricket’: Black-Jewish Relations in *Wondrous Oblivion* (2003)

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Abstract

This article explores Black-Jewish relations as presented through the prism of the 2003 film *Wondrous Oblivion*, directed by Paul Morrison. The period which the film revisits is that of the transition between the 1950s and 1960s when Britain was starting to become a multicultural society. Set in South London in 1960, *Wondrous Oblivion* is a coming of age story focusing on David Wiseman (Sam Smith), an eleven-year-old, second-generation Jewish boy who aspires to be a first-class cricketer. David lives in an England still unmarked by significant racial difference and in a world of casual anti-Semitism in which his family straddles the boundary between being immigrants and white English. Through cricket, David is able to mimic the dominant norms of English society and successfully integrate but on his own terms which simultaneously resist the dominant values.

Keywords: Jews, antisemitism, cricket, black-Jewish relations, sport, film, mimicry.

Introduction

Set in South London in 1960, Paul Morrison’s film *Wondrous Oblivion* (2003) is a coming of age story. The narrative focuses on David Wiseman (Sam Smith), an eleven-year-old, second-generation Jewish boy with a Polish father and German mother. David lives in an England still unmarked by significant racial difference and in a world of casual anti-Semitism in which the Wisemans (referred to as ‘you people’ or ‘Yids’) straddle the boundary between being immigrants and white English. The period in which the film is set is that of the transition between the 1950s and 1960s when Britain began to become an increasingly

multicultural society with the influx of immigrants from the West Indies and the racial tensions which resulted.¹

David is 'wondrously oblivious' to these not-so latent strains. He is a passionate cricket fan who lives in a fantasy world in which he envisages himself as the master/selector of an ever-expanding cast of cricket celebrities represented by his cigarette card collection that, in a subtly super-real fairy-tale quality, move within their frames. He imagines himself as a 'tactical genius', 'fearless batsman' and 'potentially the greatest all-rounder in the world'. Yet, David is also wondrously oblivious to his complete lack of cricketing talent, despite being held up as an object of derision for it by his schoolmates at his posh English prep school who are, by and large, white, protestant, and middle class. This is emphasised by the title sequence, which depicts David standing alone, on the boundary, fielding, the farthest player on the field. Behind him is open country, increasing the sense of his isolation, as well as alienation from his urban Jewish roots. In fact, the original name of the film was to be 'Outfielder',² denoting David's position on the part of the cricket field farthest from the wicket while simultaneously connoting the loneliness and distance from the other players of this outfielder who desires to fit in, to be a part of the 'in field' and hence the in-crowd. When the Jamaican Samuels family moves in next door to the Wisemans, David sees an opportunity to play and improve at cricket as the father, Dennis (Delroy Lindo), erects a cricket net in his back garden to practice with his daughters, Judy (Leonie Elliott) and Dorothy (Naomi Simpson). Dennis coaches David to be a better player as a backdrop to the process in which the Wisemans, in stark contrast to the Samuels (whose racial fixity is already determined), shift from being immigrant Jews to English Jews but who, in Homi K. Bhabha's famous phrase, remain 'almost the same, *but not quite*'.³

Cricket and the Jews

Given the vast range of English sports that Jewish director Paul Morrison could have chosen, his choice of cricket for *Wondrous Oblivion* is highly significant in light of its historical and nationalist connotations and its complex relationship with both Jewishness and blackness.

During the nineteenth century, cricket was feted as England's totem sport. The Victorians elevated it to the status of a moral discipline, symbolising, *par excellence*, moral obligations. Because cricket adhered to higher standards of sportsmanship than other games, it was perceived as the perfect system of manners, morality, ethics, justice, religion, and life itself (indeed cricket language itself became a moral code). Cricket inspired such 'English' moral virtues as prioritising the interests of the team over one's own pleasure, accepting decisions without complaining, observing both spirit and letter of the law.⁴ West Indian writer and historian CLR James summarised the cricketing code thus:

to obey the umpire's decision without question, however irrational it was [...] play with the team, which meant subordinating your personal inclinations, and even interests, to the good of the whole [...] a stiff upper lip in that we did not complain about ill-fortune. We did not denounce failures, but 'Well tried' or 'Hard luck' came easily to our lips. We were generous to our opponents and congratulated them on their victories, even when we knew they did not deserve it.⁵

The Victorians believed that participation in such a noble sport gave them strength of character and the Christian cricketer came to replace the medieval notion of the chivalrous knight.⁶ Muscular Victorian Christians adopted cricket as their special game, moulding it into an important national symbol.⁷ Cricket was extolled as a manly pastime, worthy of its status as a national pursuit. James Love's 'Cricket, a heroic poem' was typical in this respect:

Hail Cricket! Glorious, manly *British* game!

First of all sports! Be first alike in Fame!

Cricket's status was fixed in the last quarter of the nineteenth century as the Victorians considered it to be the most visible and vital element in Anglo-Saxon culture, alongside dress and language. Not only was cricket a masculine sport, but also it stood in opposition to the emasculating influences of European culture.⁸ It was glorified as 'a perfect system of manners, ethics and morals. Far from being a simple physical activity, cricket became a powerful symbolic and representational force for the Victorians who believed that it embodied all that was noble in the Anglo-Saxon character'.⁹ Part of its appeal was that it was regarded as exclusively English, uncontaminated by external and foreign influences.¹⁰

The cricket pitch became a metaphor for England itself, the repository of a lost past, which nostalgically evoked a timeless space of memory.¹¹ As Anthony Bateman has shown, from the mid-eighteenth century onwards, cricket 'began to be inscribed as a symbol of the nation [...] being explicitly treated as a symbol of British national identity'.¹² Poets, including EV Lucas, Wordsworth, John Burnby and Lord Byron, in particular, interpellated cricket into a literary and nationalist discourse that associated it with the unchanging ideals of English pastoral and rural life that reassuringly never changes. This narrative had appropriated for itself a mythic antiquity and venerated ancient past that reached back into the Anglo-Saxon and Celtic eras, stretching as far back as 100 BCE (some claimed). Cricket was praised as an integral part of the English rural scene(ry), an innocent premodern, preindustrial, folk pastime uncontaminated by modernity, and thus authentically English. Thus, to play cricket, especially on a village green, 'was no longer to merely partake in a localised practice, but to be part of a highly ritualised element of the national culture'.¹³

This celebration of cricket as the symbol of Englishness was deeply inscribed with its promotion of the pastoral combined with the rejection of moral and physical corruption of the city and town.¹⁴ The country and its inhabitants were regarded as the essence of England, unsullied by racial degeneration and the false values of the unreal, unnatural, urban,

cosmopolitan life. As Alun Howkins has pointed out, ‘the ideology of England and Englishness is to a remarkable degree rural’, contrasting rural innocence and purity with industrial corruption and violence.¹⁵ The countryside, especially that of southern England with its thatched roofs, village greens and hedgerows was believed to be the source of the English race and culture. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the cricket ground and its lovingly tended pitch within the English village, ranked in symbolic importance besides the pub and the church, all three of which were intertwined in social composition and leadership.¹⁶

Cricket - and village cricket in particular - had been constructed as a potent symbol of pastoral England.¹⁷ The description of cricket as encapsulated by the phrase of the ‘thwack of leather on willow’ to refer to the ball and bat respectively privileged those elements drawn from nature. Cricket was believed to embody the spirit of the English countryside and village cricket was its purest form. It was pictured as being played on the village green bordered by trees, and completed by the spire of the Anglican church and village inn/pub. As Jack Williams has written, ‘such adulation of cricket can be related to the English pastoral tradition, which idealised the rustic as the repository of traditional English moral values and found expression in the revival of folk song and dance, pastoral painting and sculpture, the garden village movement and perhaps even the flight to suburbia and cult of gardening’.¹⁸ In stark contrast, the urban was unreal and unnatural in the Victorian worldview and by the late nineteenth century racial degeneration was linked to city life. It was in the city and town in which the distinctly un-English dwelled as the site of moral and physical decay.

This Victorian eulogy of cricket coincided with the historical period that was very fertile in producing ‘invented tradition’.¹⁹ According to Eric Hobsbawm, the invention of tradition is the process of formalisation and ritualisation of a cultural form, characterised by reference to the past. The peculiarity of ‘invented tradition’ is the attempt to establish

continuity with the past, which need not be lengthy or even historical, so long as it is suitable. This period was so fertile for the invention of tradition because it was an era of profound transformation in Western Europe, which necessitated new constructions to ensure and express social cohesion and identity. Increasing immigration raised the problem of how to assimilate a heterogeneous mass of people who were not English by birth; a unique English identity had to be constructed out of these diverse constituent elements and sport in general, in particular cricket, had a part to play in this process.

So where did Jews like David fit into this narrative? Since the sordid, money-grubbing Jew of antisemitic mythology and English literature (Shylock, Fagin and their ilk) resided in the town and city, cricket's pastoral and rustic ideal, in theory, excluded the urban Jew. As proof of this, Joseph Jacobs wrote in 1898, 'I for one shall never be satisfied of the complete assimilation of Jews in the English nation till one of them has rowed in a 'Varsity race or played in England v. Australia.'²⁰ This is suggested by the oxymoron inherent in the title (surely a deliberately ironic one) of Daniel Boyarin's essay 'Jewish Cricket'.²¹ David's attempt to play the sport, therefore, was his struggle to be English, to participate in the nation state. But it seems doomed from the outset, an attempt to reconcile irreconcilable elements.

Whitening Up

Yet, conversely, playing cricket was a means for immigrants, like David Wiseman, to inscribe and interpellate themselves into the national narrative.²² During the second half of the nineteenth century cricket (like other sports) gradually became part of the British civilising process, exposing colonial subjects to particular codes, forms of behaviour, styles of dress, techniques and ideas. It is widely agreed among historians of sport that more than any other pastime, cricket articulated the imperial cultural bond, symbolising solidarity and superiority.²³ Hence, cricket played a central role in the development of British colonial rule

more than any other sport. It became *the* imperial game.²⁴ ‘Where the British flag went, so too went cricket’, explains Brian Stoddart.²⁵ Jingoists celebrated cricket as ‘the symbol of public school imperial masculinity’,²⁶ and cricket and empire became ‘mutually supporting ideologies’.²⁷ On 14th May 1894, for example, J.E.C. Welldon, the headmaster of Harrow (one of the principal English public schools), argued that the school curriculum must relate to the administration of Empire for the colonising genius of the English was to be found not only in its racial superiority but also in team games:

I do not think I am wrong in saying that the spark, the pluck, the resolution, and the strength which have within the last few weeks animated the little garrison at Chitral and the gallant force that has accomplished their deliverance are effectively acquired in the cricket-fields and the football-fields of the great public schools, and in the games of which they are the habitual scenes. The pluck, the energy, the perseverance, the good temper, the self-control, the discipline, the cooperation, the *esprit de corps*, which merit success in cricket or football, are the very qualities which win the day in peace or war.²⁸

The qualities and authority with which the English colonial administrators governed the Empire, therefore, were the very same used to captain the cricket team.

Thus cricket came to exemplify the colonial relationship, expressing imperialist notions to the greatest extent.²⁹ Unlike football, cricket did not become a global(ised) game because its geographical spread was confined to precisely that of British imperial expansion, test matches initially being restricted to the Empire and its colonies.³⁰ Furthermore, its connotations of ‘old Empire’ meant that it lagged behind other sports in its penetration of ethnic communities.³¹ This was because cricket was perceived to be the most ‘English of English games’, the game that epitomised ‘Englishness’.³² Cricket essentially developed into

a cultural statement of the private and exclusive nature of English colonial culture, segregating the ruling elites from the indigenous subalterns.³³

Cricket soon came to play a key role in the policy of Anglicization whereby an English-educated elite of colonial subjects was to be trained to become English in tastes, customs, and manners in order to assist the colonial bureaucracy and to act as a model for other colonised subjects.³⁴ As the most gentlemanly of sports, colonial subjects came to associate cricket with gentility, 'civilisation' and 'the perfect expression of the values of bourgeois civility, Anglo-Saxon ethics, and public school morality.'³⁵

As the hegemonic sport favoured by the ruling cultural elites, cricket symbolised social status and influence, making it a strategy for the mimicking colonial subject to play cricket as part of the assimilatory process. Since cricket became inextricably tied up with notions of colonialism, it was the perfect sport for mimicry. For Bhabha, 'mimicry is like camouflage' and 'a form of resemblance'.³⁶ It is the result of the colonised's desire to assimilate and the coloniser's refusal to allow that *full* assimilation. As Laura Levitt helpfully explains, 'for the colonial subject, resemblance to Western cultural norms is critical, a form of concealment and protection.'³⁷ Although Bhabha's terms of reference concerned the British Empire in India, his model of the ambivalent relationship between the coloniser and the colonised is particularly pertinent for understanding the condition of Jews, like David Wiseman, in the modern context.

Cricket allowed its participants to 'whiten up'. In its requirement for a full-body costume, including white shirt, trousers, jumper, socks, shoes, gloves, and cap (and more recently a helmet and face mask), cricket provided the perfect material for the mimic. Dorothy Wordsworth, sister of the great English poet, described cricketers as 'combatants dressed in white-sleeved shirts' and John Burnby referred to their 'milk-white vestments'.³⁸ But this whitening was more than just sartorial, as cricket was intertwined with notions of

race. The Victorian mindset believed cricket embodied the essence of Englishness, which was very much a white identity. Since Empire was based on the presumption of white racial superiority and cricket was used to bolster Empire, cricket itself came to express similar ideas, becoming virtually indistinguishable from the ideology of imperialism.³⁹

Alongside visual mimicry, with its intricate and arcane language, of all middle-class English sports, cricket provided the discursive material for mimicry. As mentioned above, cricketing language had become one of the means for the dominant classes in England to articulate moral (and increasingly political) judgments about others. One could be criticised for ‘not playing with the team’, ‘keeping a stiff upper lip’ or ‘playing with a straight bat’. Cricket also has a proliferation of terms, tactics, and a plethora of positions perhaps unrivalled by the other English middle-class, gentlemanly sports, viz. ‘second slip’, ‘extra-cover’, ‘silly mid-on’, or ‘silly mid-off’. ‘Every colonized people’, Frantz Fanon observed, ‘finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation’⁴⁰ and for the colonial subject, such an extensive language was a gift.

This was especially the case for Jews like David. A long tradition of anti-Semitic literature and ideology, which posited that the language of the Jew immediately and urgently marked him as different, alien, and Other, made the Jew deeply anxious about sounding ‘too Jewish’.⁴¹ As Sander Gilman has observed, ‘Within the European tradition of seeing the Jew as different, there is a closely linked tradition of hearing the Jews’ language as marked by the corruption of being a Jew’.⁴² In the May-October 1893 issue of the British fin-de-siècle journal, *The Butterfly*, for example, there are images which associated a precise Jewish physiognomy with specific speech. An entire discourse about capital(ism) and trade were alleged to characterise Jews.

And, for Jews in particular, there was no requirement to shave. Indeed, many famous cricketers, such as W.G. Grace, had beards, thus resembling cricketing Hasidim – in a form

of unintentional reversal, the English cricketer mimicked the Jew! G. Bose, an early disciple of Sigmund Freud and the founder of psychoanalysis in India, even sent his master a depiction of an English gentleman cricketer, remarking that he imagined Freud resembled the image.⁴³ Cricket, therefore, provided plenty of opportunities to mimic and thus mask one's ineradicable Jewish difference.⁴⁴

Turning back to the film, *Wondrous Oblivion*, David takes advantage of these opportunities. In appearance, he is the very image of a proper English cricket player. 'Spotlessly turned out', he is fully clothed in white shirt, shorts, shoes, socks, gloves, and pads. Various shots depict him whitening his shoes. Even when he is told that such dress is not a requirement ('No need to wear whites, if you don't want to' and 'You don't have to wear full kit, if you don't want to'), he insists on maintaining the correct dress.⁴⁵ In posture and actions, he likewise mimics the cricketer's actions and stance. David is hence the perfect mimic and Dennis describes him as 'a professional. A real professional'.

Dennis coaches David to be a much better player to become, in appearance and behaviour, the perfect mimic. Where, at the beginning of the film, he is abandoned by the other boys, David begins to become acceptable and accepted. He passes their cricketing test both literally and figuratively. Those who laughed at him at the outset suddenly begin to take him seriously and David becomes 'one of the boys'. Where, initially, the other boys leave without him, he is now part of the in-group or in-field, integrated and assimilated. And since they are all dressed in their cricket whites, he becomes indistinguishable from them. David's move up the batting ranks, from last man to middle order, codes this greater acceptance and thus assimilation into the dominant white norms. On the surface, therefore, David has assimilated, reflecting Sander Gilman's observation that the struggle of Jews in the West is motivated by 'the desire for invisibility, the desire to become "white"'.⁴⁶

Blurring the Boundaries

But David is a blurred copy of a cricketer. In using this term, one must return to Homi Bhabha's formulation. Bhabha explained how the mimic is never entirely successful in adopting the cultural norms of the host society because of the impossibility of abandoning her/his previous culture, which is indelibly inscribed on mind and body. Even if successful, therefore, full identification is never completely possible because mimicry or resemblance is not the same as equivalence. It is 'the difference between being English and being Anglicized'.⁴⁷ It is 'a flawed colonial mimesis, in which to be Anglicized, is *emphatically* not to be English.'⁴⁸

One area where it is cleared that David is a blurred copy of a cricketer is *values*. If, as Pierre Bourdieu suggests, sport contains latent anti-intellectualism, then the film initially premises that David will fail at cricket because it emphasises the *goyim naches* of manliness over the intelligence and sensitivity of *yiddishkeit*.⁴⁹ In this respect, David's characterisation still resorts to stock filmic stereotypes of Jews. His given name, which invokes the biblical hero who, in Dennis' words, 'killed the giant' Goliath, suggests he will use his *Yiddische kopf* ('Jewish brains) to overcome the odds to defeat any obstacles. His surname ('wise man,' an Anglicisation of the German *Weissenkopf*, lit. 'white head', but suggests the German for 'wise man') emphasises his intellectual virtues, his *yiddishe kopf*, over his physical prowess; indeed, although obsessed with cricket, he is incompetent at it, being uncoordinated and lacking any natural skill at the game. He is, as Paul Morrison puts it on the DVD commentary, a 'klutz' with a bat. As one of his Jewish friends asks him in synagogue (in one of the film's least authentic and least convincingly delivered lines), 'Why do you waste your time on cricket Wiseman? You're a good scholar'. Judy, whom David has been assisting with her mathematics homework, also comments, 'You're too brainy for cricket'. When his mother, who is knitting him a cricket sweater, tells him 'you'll be the smartest boy in the

team', the double meaning of 'smart' stands out (later a neighbour will comment on his 'smart uniform'). His schoolmaster makes him scorer, rather than a player, suggesting that, like an accountant or banker, he has 'a head for numbers' and it is indeed stereotypical that David is good at mathematics and that his father is also his shop's book-keeper and accountant.

The characterisation of Dennis, which similarly resorts to stock filmic stereotypes of blacks, emphasizes this stereotypical representation of David.⁵⁰ Where David (and by extension his father Victor) is defined by his brain, Dennis is defined by his brawn. He is a manual labourer, working in a foundry, and many shots emphasise Dennis' activity and motion; Dennis personifies movement as he builds, bowls, bats, dances, kisses. During the film, he constructs a cricket pitch and nets in his back garden, he plays cricket and teaches the children to play, he fixes Ruth's washing machine, and he dances. Shots of Dennis in a white vest accentuate his muscular build and Ruth begins to fall for him. He is the epitome of athleticism and eroticisation in clear contrast to David's father, who is often pictured at the bedroom window, peering down into Dennis' garden, figuratively standing in for the passive and static 'woman at the window' typical of British costume drama.⁵¹ And even when David plays well, he is a staid, measured, controlled player (at one point he is asked to 'steady the ship', but his emotions get the better of him and he plays in a wild, unrestrained fashion) in contrast to Dennis' instinctive athleticism ('You forget about the strokes', he teaches David. 'And you free yourself up now').

The Jamaican family introduces vibrancy and energy into this film and despite David's desire to blend into the English world of cricket, it is the Jamaican world that ultimately seduces him. The arrival of the Samuels is marked by loud talking and music, much to the consternation of the 'natives'. The Samuels' music is joyous and they 'know how to live', says Paul Morrison on the DVD commentary accompanying the film. Later,

Dennis takes Ruth to a SKA dance. David plays a record for Judy, which she rapidly replaces with something more 'funky'. She even teaches David how to dance. The Samuels family also brings a whirl of colour into this drab and subdued London neighbourhood. They wear vivacious clothing in contrast to that of the Wisemans and the other families on the street. As Paul Morrison explains, 'We went for certain colours, we wanted fifties colours in the Jewish home and the West Indian family bring a whole set of other colours into the street and into the movie; richer, stronger colours.' These colours contrast particularly with those the Wisemans wear. Victor is often wearing a grey suit and jumper, with a tie and hat, clothing that literally restricts him while metaphorically repressing him. Dennis, by contrast, has loose fitting brightly coloured outfits that enable him to move freely. Consequently, the Wisemans blend in with the rest of the English population and, by extension, move from outsiders to acceptance – at least in appearance. Figuratively, they become white because, as Victor realises, the Jamaican immigrants help to deflect racial prejudice away from the Jews.⁵²

But Ruth and David resist this full whitening up, as they are drawn to this other world. Dennis acts as a surrogate father to David as his father further withdraws into himself, saving up, we later learn, so that the family can buy a house in Hendon to be among other Jews. David learns from Dennis to trust his own body and to internalise a sense of cricketing rhythm. Ruth begins to feel sexually attracted to Dennis, who gives her more attention than Victor. 'You stirred up so much in me', she tells him. 'Nobody taught me how to be a woman'.

Jewish Excess

Homi Bhabha stated that 'mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference.'⁵³ On one level, as Laura Levitt has pointed out, in their desire to fit in, Jews strive to be like everyone else, only more so, that is to 'out-perform'.⁵⁴ But as hard as Jews

try to be like everyone else, it is the very excess of their efforts, their desire to out-perform, that marks them as different; the very kind of difference that Bhabha suggested.⁵⁵ To take another prominent filmic example: one of the few Jewish cricketers to be depicted on film is Harold Abrahams (Ben Cross) in *Chariots of Fire* (dir. Hugh Hudson, 1981). During a playful indoor game inside a Cambridge University ballroom, Abrahams appeals furiously over an umpiring decision while his fellow students sneer and laugh at him for his insular orientation. ‘As intense as ever’, one of them teases. Even here the cricket-playing Jew is marked as Other, not the same, for his serious approach to the game serves to distance him from the gentlemen-amateurs who surround him.

On another level, this slippage or excess can mean something quite different. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin explain:

When colonial discourse encourages the colonized subject to ‘mimic’ the colonizer, by adopting the colonizer’s cultural habits, assumptions, institutions and values, the result is never a simple reproduction of those traits. Rather, the result is a ‘blurred copy’ of the colonizer that can be quite threatening. This is because mimicry is never very far from mockery, since it can appear to parody whatever it mimics. Mimicry therefore locates a crack in the certainty of colonial dominance, an uncertainty in its control of the behaviour of the colonized.⁵⁶

Mimicry can lead to an undermining of the dominant values. For example, not only was British-controlled Palestine an anomalous imperial colony (in that it was a Mandate), but also it was one of the few parts of the Empire in which cricket was not played, as the Jews of Palestine self-consciously and decisively rejected British historical, cultural and imperial values. David Vital described Palestine as perhaps ‘the only corner of the Great British Empire in which no one ever played cricket’.⁵⁷ Similarly, even those Baghdadi traders in Shanghai who sought acceptance in the British community by mimicking an Anglicised way

of life -- belonging to a club, drinking whiskey, riding and breeding horses – were not inclined to play cricket.⁵⁸

The slippage or excess is evident in *Wondrous Oblivion* through David's *Yiddische* values. David is driven by a desire to play: winning is secondary to that concern, as encapsulated in the film title's suggestion of an overarching and gentle (but not gentle) naivety in clear contrast to his school's 'winner take all' philosophy. Excelling at cricket is a means for David to gain the clearly highly desirable acceptance with his class- and team-mates he craves, particularly as his birthday approaches. David's improving cricket skills enhance his popularity at school. But success at cricket, mimicry, produces a capacity for hurtful insensitivity – *goyim naches* – as when David shows cowardice in snubbing Judy in favour of his new prep school friends. He becomes acceptable but at what price, the film asks; and is the price of this acceptance and assimilation a price worth paying? This is the crux of the film, according to Paul Morrison.⁵⁹

Nevertheless, David ultimately manifests a *Yiddische* spirit of *menschlikayt*. This is clearly shown when a picnic cementing the Wiseman and Samuels families' friendship clashes with a vital school cricket fixture. In the traditional sports movie, the underdog overcomes all obstacles to win the tournament for the team; in *Wondrous Oblivion* this would dictate that David must score the decisive runs so his school wins the Junior Challenge Cup. Yet, in stark contrast to this stock genre plot, David blithely excuses himself from the match because 'something more important has come up', demonstrating that despite his growing prowess at a non-Jewish game, his Jewish values are still intact – that winning at all costs, the competitive drive and ethos of *goyim naches*, is not the be all and end all of cricket, and hence life. In fact, the Junior Challenge Cup Final is never mentioned again; no one inquires as to the result and because the film ends before we know the outcome, David suffers no onscreen recriminations for having absented himself. In this way, *Wondrous Oblivion*

becomes that rare creature – the non-normative, non-traditional sports movie -- in that David gives up what he's chosen to do. He has learned something more important: friendship. So, while David mimics the dominant 'forms of authority' in England, its cultural habits and institutions, he rejects its values.⁶⁰

Furthermore, Paul Morrison uses David to mock the dominant culture. The non-diegetic playing of Yiddish singer and lyricist Mickey Katz's 'The Barber of Schlemiel', a self-consciously Jewish mid-century American parody of Rossini's 'The Barber of Seville', to a comically sped-up sequence of back garden cricket, reinforces the sense of absurdity, coding the clash between *goyim naches* and *yiddishkeit*. Following Josh Kun here, Morrison's choice of track, directly invokes, even if unwittingly, 'Katz's refusal of dominant mid-century narratives of Jewish assimilation into postwar whiteness', to evoke what Kun calls 'the aurality of Jewish difference'.⁶¹ Perhaps Morrison is saying that David neither wants nor desires full assimilation into Englishness, for Katz's song, at the level of lyrics and subject matter, as well as musical interruptions, embodies significant anti-assimilationist strategies, complicating the 1950s movement of Jews towards whiteness.⁶²

As the film develops, and as the two families grow closer, the blending of black and Jewish culture also grows. The devout Samuels honour and enjoy David's Jewish culture and heritage, pointing out how Jesus was Jewish and gave them the Old Testament, thus acknowledging the source of their beliefs. David recites Psalm 23 in Hebrew while a black gospel choir simultaneously sings it in English. The Samuels' Hebrew surname also reinforces the sense of kinship and interconnection, again resisting any simple whitening up of the Jews. The families share and swap food: Samuels give David a mango and he shows Judy what a bagel is. Judy helps David to talk about his relatives who were murdered in the Holocaust. A close-up shot of Dennis holding David's hands as he teaches him to how to correctly hold the bat reinforces the racial harmony and integration theme of the film while

pointing to the ironic situation that it is a working-class Jamaican immigrant, himself a colonial mimic, who is teaching the English-born boy how to be a good cricketer and hence mimic. And where at the beginning of the film, David's cigarette card collection of players was exclusively white, by the end of the film, black players are in evidence and David even dreams of playing for the Jamaican team. Even the standoffish, aloof and withdrawn Victor embraces this brave new world. He teaches himself how cricket work using buttons from his haberdashery and textiles firm, and joins in the film's final, culminating game. In a scene that almost exactly replicates the opening pre-title sequence, Victor attempts to dive for a ball and misses it completely, letting it go for four runs.

Conclusion

David Biale has asked, 'what kinds of subjects – *what kinds of Jews* – has multiculturalism created?' In answering this question with reference to English Jewishness, Homi Bhabha's formulation of 'almost the same, *but not quite*' has been useful.⁶³ On one level, it can be used to refer to the primary signifier of Jewish male difference – circumcision – but on another it (albeit unwittingly I would suggest) invokes a radicalised schema in which Jews were never 'whitened' as they were in the United States during the 1950s.⁶⁴ Prior to the Second World War, Jews were frequently categorised as 'Negro', 'Oriental', 'less than white', or 'off-white', markedly inferior to and different from the whiteness of the Englishman. But where the American Jew was accepted as white in the post-war era, the Jewish community in England 'developed in a mono-cultural society' in which they were told to identify as loyal English subjects.⁶⁵ Furthermore, where 'Jews were, more or less, accepted as white' in the United States, the 'imperative to whiten the Jews', owing to a lack of large-scale immigration and economic need, did not occur in the United Kingdom.⁶⁶ Consequently, Jews could be considered as '[a]lmost the same *but not white*'.⁶⁷ In this way, their bodies bore the brunt of

‘the difference between being English and being Anglicized’⁶⁸ but where their Anglicisation was never fully completed. *Wondrous Oblivion* codes the common drive and desire of English Jews to assimilate and fit in through the device of sport. However, in the Wisemans’ desire to side with the Samuels, through embracing of their cultural norms rather than that of the dominant English culture, the Jews retain their liminal space, neither fully black nor fully white.

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Notes

¹ See Panikos Panayi, *An Immigration History of Britain: Multicultural Racism since 1800* (London: Routledge, 2010).

² See ‘*Wondrous Oblivion*’, <https://www.bfi.org.uk/films-tv-people/4ce2b88474d43>. Date accessed: 27 November 2018.

³ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), 128.

⁴ Keith A.P. Sandiford, ‘England’, in Brian Stoddart and Keith A.P. Sandiford (eds), *The Imperial Game: Cricket, Culture, and Society* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1998), 9, 29; Jack Williams, *Cricket and Race* (London and New York: Berg, 2001), 15.

⁵ CLR James, *Beyond a Boundary* (London: Yellow Jersey Press, 2005), 33.

⁶ Keith A.P. Sandiford, ‘Introduction’, in Stoddart and Sandiford (eds), *The Imperial Game*, 1; Sandiford, ‘England’, 19.

⁷ Sandiford, ‘England’, 21.

⁸ Anthony Bateman, “‘More Mighty Than the Bat, The Pen...’: Culture, Hegemony and the Literaturisation of Cricket”, *Sport in History* 23:1 (2003), 32.

⁹ Sandiford, ‘England’, 9.

¹⁰ Sandiford, ‘Introduction’, 1.

¹¹ Bateman, “‘More Mighty Than the Bat, The Pen...’”, 27-44.

¹² *Ibid.*, 27, 32.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁴ Williams, *Cricket and Race*, 40; G. Boyes, *The Imagined Village: Culture, Ideology and the English Folk Revival* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1993); A Howkins, ‘The Discovery of Rural England’, in R. Colls and P. Dodds (eds), *Englishness: Politics and Culture 1880-1920* (Beckenham: Croon Helmn, 1986).

¹⁵ Alun Howkins, ‘The Discovery of Rural England’, in Colls and Dodd (eds), *Englishness*, 62.

¹⁶ Sandiford, ‘England’, 11.

¹⁷ Richard Cashman, ‘Australia,’ in Stoddart and Sandiford (eds), *The Imperial Game*, 34.

¹⁸ Williams, *Cricket and Race*, 16.

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- ¹⁹ Eric Hobsbawm, 'Mass-Producing Traditions: Europe, 1870-1914', in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds) *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 263-307.
- ²⁰ Joseph Jacobs, 'The Typical Character of Anglo-Jewish History', *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 10:2 (January 1898), 233.
- ²¹ Daniel Boyarin, 'Jewish Cricket', *PMLA* 113:1 (January 1998), 40-45.
- ²² This explains poet Siegfried Sassoon's intense passion for the game (alongside such other *goyische naches* as hunting); in his desire to be more English than the English (a marker of the assimilationist Jew's desire to be like everyone else only more so), Sassoon sought to expunge the commercial and urban aspects of his Jewishness by becoming a cricket-playing, hunting country gentleman.
- ²³ See Helman, 'Sport on the Sabbath'.
- ²⁴ Brian Stoddart, 'West Indies,' in Stoddart and Sandiford (eds), *The imperial game*, 83.
- ²⁵ Brian Stoddart, 'Other Cultures,' in Stoddart and Sandiford (eds), *The imperial game*, 135.
- ²⁶ Bateman, "'More Mighty Than the Bat, The Pen...'", 37.
- ²⁷ Williams, *Cricket and Race*, 1.
- ²⁸ JEC Welldon, 'The Imperial Purpose of Education', *Proceedings of the Royal Colonial Institute* XXVI (1894-5), 829.
- ²⁹ Christopher Merrett and John Wainwright, 'South Africa', in Sandiford, 58.
- ³⁰ Stoddart, 'Other Cultures', 135.
- ³¹ Cashman, 'Australia', *The Imperial Game*, 52.
- ³² *Ibid.*, 34.
- ³³ Richard Cashman, 'The Subcontinent', in Stoddart and Sandiford (eds), *The Imperial Game*, 118.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 118-9.
- ³⁵ Sandiford, 'Introduction', 1; S. Gikandi, *Maps of Englishness: Writing Identity in the Culture of Colonialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 9.
- ³⁶ Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 128.
- ³⁷ Laura Levitt, 'Redressing Jewish Difference in Tania Modleski's 'Cinema and the Dark Continent.''" *Journal of Religion and Film*, 1, no. 2 (October 1997), <http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/Levittrjd.htm> [last accessed in August 2010].
- ³⁸ Dorothy Wordsworth, *The Journals of Dorothy Wordsworth*, ed. E. de Selincourt (London, 1941), 8; John Burnby, 'The Kentish Cricketers (In 1773)', cited in Bateman, "'More Mighty Than the Bat, The Pen...'", 33.
- ³⁹ Williams, *Cricket and Race*, 10.
- ⁴⁰ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 18.
- ⁴¹ Josh Kun, 'The Yiddish Are Coming: Mickey Katz, Antic-Semitism, and the Sound of Jewish Difference', *American Jewish History* 87:4 (December 1999), 360-1; Sander Gilman, *The Jew's Body* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), 2.
- ⁴² Gilman, *The Jew's Body*, 11.
- ⁴³ Anat Helman, 'Sport on the Sabbath: Controversy in 1920s and 1930s Jewish Palestine', *The Journal of the International Journal of the History of Sport* 25:1 (January 2008), 40.
- ⁴⁴ Boyarin, 'Jewish Cricket', 261.
- ⁴⁵ One wonders here if the schoolmaster is also inadvertently commenting on David's attempt to 'whiten up,' to pass.
- ⁴⁶ Gilman, *Jew's Body*, 235.
- ⁴⁷ Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 128.
- ⁴⁸ Bhabha, cited in Bryan Cheyette, *Constructions of 'the Jew' in English Literature and Society: Racial Representations, 1875-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 65.

⁴⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, 'Sport and Social Class', in C. Mukerji and M. Schudson (eds), *Rethinking Popular Culture: Contemporary Perspectives in Cultural Studies* (Berkeley, CA: The University of California Press, 1991), 357–73.

⁵⁰ Inspired by CLR James, Dennis considers cricket an art form, and he quotes from his book in the film.

⁵¹ See Mary P. Wood, *Contemporary European Cinema* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2007).

⁵² See Claudia Sternberg, 'British Jewish Cinema and the Diaspora Imagination: Crosscultural Encounters in the films of Paul Morrison', *Journal for the Study of British Cultures* 16 (2009), 157–72.

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⁵³ Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 123.

⁵⁴ Robert Wistrich, quoted in Jon Stratton, *Jews, Race, and Popular Music* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 157.

⁵⁵ Levitt, 'Redressing Jewish Difference'.

⁵⁶ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* (London: Routledge, 2000), 139.

⁵⁷ Helman, 'Sport on the Sabbath'. Ironically, it was only after independence and the establishment of the State, that is once the British had left, that cricket was played in Israel, imported by new Jewish immigrants from South Africa. The rejection of cricket is highlighted by the contrasting acceptance of football, which was popular in Palestine, because football was not specifically associated with the British, having been imported by Jewish immigrants to Palestine from outside the British Empire. The popularity of football in Palestine emphasised just how unpopular cricket was among the Jews there. See David Goldblatt, *The Ball is Round: A Global History of Football* (London: Penguin, 2007), 238–9; Haggai Harif and Yair Galily, 'Sport and Politics in Palestine, 1918–48: Football as a Mirror Reflecting the Relations between Jews and Britons', *Soccer and Society* 4:1 (Spring 2003), 41–56.

⁵⁸ Chiara Betta, 'From Orientals to Imagined Britons: Baghdadi Jews in Shanghai', *Modern Asian Studies* 37:4 (October 2003), 101–5. Yet, at the same time, Boyarin points out that 'Jews have always played their own forms of French cricket, inhabiting the interstices between the colonizer and the colonized and seen by both as the other'. Boyarin, 'Jewish Cricket', 43.

⁵⁹ Paul Morrison, DVD commentary accompanying *Wondrous Oblivion*.

⁶⁰ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 130.

⁶¹ Kun, 'The Yiddish Are Coming', 345.

⁶² Ibid., 351, 357.

⁶³ Ibid., 123.

⁶⁴ Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America* (New Brunswick, NJ and London: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 10.

⁶⁵ Ben Gidley, cited in *The Jewish Chronicle*, 30th July 2010, 15.

⁶⁶ Jon Stratton, *Jewish Identity in Western Pop Culture: The Holocaust and Trauma Through Modernity* (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 198. Eli Lederhendler, however, dismisses the findings of the so-called 'whiteness' studies. Before the late 1910s, he argues, Jewish immigrants rarely encountered African Americans at work or in their neighbourhoods nor did they quickly grasp the complicated American racial code system. In short, Jews integrated in America primarily as members of the working class, and class-consciousness drove ethnicisation processes rather than the other way around. See his *Jewish Immigrants and American Capitalism, 1880–1920: From Caste to Class* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

⁶⁷ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 128.

⁶⁸ Ibid.